DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 455 CG 018 611

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TITLE Measures of Self-Help Group Quality: Observer and Participant Views.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHHS), Rockville, MD.
PUB DATE Aug 85
GRANT NIMH-MH-37390
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (93rd, Los Angeles, CA, August 23-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; Group Dynamics; *Observation; *Participant Satisfaction; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Quality of Life; *Self Help Programs

ABSTRACT

Since objective data on the effectiveness of self-help groups are not available, participants' views of a program's value are instructive. A study was undertaken to contrast participants' (N=232) evaluations of their self-help meetings with independent observers' (N=11) evaluations and to describe the components of their respective views in terms of the actual behaviors occurring during the meetings. Data were collected in Illinois from 334 meetings of GROW, a self-help organization for individuals with a history of emotional or psychiatric problems, using the Self-Help Interaction Codes (SHIC), an observational coding system designed for the self-help context, and two rating measures. Principal components analyses for participants' and observers' rating measures yielded a single evaluation variable for participants, and two evaluation variables for observers. Multiple regression analyses were performed using the three evaluation variables as criterion variables and the SHIC behavioral occurrence variables as predictors. Results indicated that participants' positive evaluations of a self-help meeting were predicted by the relative absence of negative behaviors and the presence of supports, interpretations, and guidances. Observers' evaluations were divided into two components, meeting quality and positive meeting climate. Meeting quality was predicted by the relative absence of group process comments and the presence of the agree and personal disclosure codes. Meetings with low proportions of negative behaviors and personal questions and high proportions of supports and interpretations were rated by the observer as having a positive meeting climate. (Author/NRB)

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Measures of Self-Help Group Quality: Observer and Participant Views

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Paper presented at the 93rd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at Los Angeles, California, August, 1985

Support for this research came from an NIMH grant (MH37390) to Edward Seidman and Julian Rappaport.

CG 018611

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Abstract

The present study contrasts participants' evaluations of their self help meetings with independent observers' evaluations and describes the components of their respective views in terms of the actual behaviors occurring during the meetings. Data were collected from 334 GROW meetings in Illinois using the SHIC, an observational coding system designed for the self help context, and two rating measures. Principal components analyses for participants' and observers' rating measures yielded a single evaluation variable for participants, and two evaluation variables for observers. Multiple regression analyses were performed using the three evaluation variables as criterion variables and the SHIC behavioral occurrence variables as predictors. Results indicated that participants' positive evaluations of a self-help meeting were predicted by the relative absence of negative behaviors and the presence of supports, interpretations, and guidances. Observers' evaluations were divided into two components, meeting quality and positive meeting climate. Meeting quality was predicted by the relative absence of group process comments and the presence of the agree and personal disclosure codes. Meetings in which there were low proportions of negative behaviors and personal questions and high proportions of supports and interpretations were likely to be rated by the observer as having a positive meeting climate. Similarities and differences between the observers' and participants' views are examined. Overall, the behavioral occurrence variables were moderately predictive of meeting evaluations; reasons for this are discussed and a direction for future research is suggested.

Measures of Self-Help Group Quality:

Observer and Participant Views

Self-help groups are growing in popularity as alternatives and adjuncts to traditional mental health services. Nationwide, self-help organizations have mushroomed, offering help and support for a variety of problems from overeating to widowhood to chronic mental illness. Whatever the targeted problem, the weekly group meeting is a hallmark of many self-help group approaches. However, the commitment to anonymity and nonprofessional helping networks that characterize self-help groups makes empirical research on their activities difficult to undertake. Our understanding of self-help groups is thus limited, despite the large helping role such groups are beginning to take in our society.

We know very little about the actual behaviors and processes that characterize self-help group meetings and still less about the value of these activities to the participants. Short of having data on the objective effectiveness of self-help groups, it is instructive to understand the participant's view of the value of the weekly meetings. What group behaviors lead members to feel positive about their group meetings? In an attempt to address this issue, the present study measured actual behaviors occurring during self-help meetings and used these behaviors to predict both participants' and observers' evaluations of the meetings.

Data were collected for this study in conjunction with a large-scale longitudinal research project evaluating GROW, a self-help organization for individuals with a history of emotional or psychiatric problems (see Rappaport, et al., 1985 for a detailed description). Founded in Australia

in 1957, GROW has expanded to include over 500 groups in Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the United States. GROW offers a program for recovery and growth to its membership which includes weekly meetings, reading and memorizing of GROW literature, and friendly social contact between members.

GROW Meetings

A participant "leader," chosen at each GROW meeting, leads the group through the steps of the "group method." Meetings are thus highly structured and there is little variation in the essential components of the meeting. The meetings open and close with group recitations of prayers and pledges, and a period of objective discussion and learning of GROW literature is sandwiched between two periods of group problem-solving. The GROW training manual (1981) outlines the five primary ingredients of a good meeting:

1. An encounter of persons through personal testimonies i.e., descriptions of a member's decline to maladjustment and growth to maturity.
2. Friendly support and help through current problem solving.
3. Adult education through reading and discussion of the GROW program.
4. Mutual activation through the recommendation of practical tasks to be carried out in day-to-day living between meetings.
5. Personal development through reports on and assessment of member's progress.

The Assessment of Group Behavior

A variety of measures for group activities and processes in the self-help context have been developed (e.g., Lieberman, 1979; Levy, 1979).

These measures, however, rely exclusively on the retrospective ratings of observers and/or group members. No direct assessment of actual in-group behavior as it occurs had been attempted in self-help meetings. The collaborative nature of the GROW evaluation project (Toro and Keogh, 1984) allowed us to circumvent certain constraints that have plagued previous self-help researchers. The GROW organization allowed our observers to record group behavior as it occurred in the group meetings.

Although the direct assessment of group behavior is commonplace in other substantive areas of psychology, such as small group and group therapy research, none of the coding schemes for group behavior from other areas are fully appropriate for the self-help context. Drawing on three existing systems, Bale's (1950) IPA, Hill's (1969) system for counselor behavior, and Whalen's (1969) system for classifying behavior in small groups, we developed the Self-Help Interaction Codes (SHIC; for details on measure development, see Peters, McFadden and Chertok, 1984). The SHIC records behaviors relevant to the tasks of a self-help group while operating within the constraints placed on an observer at an actual, ongoing self-help meeting (e.g., no mechanical recording devices). A continuous, comment-by-comment coding strategy was employed to preserve the sequential structure of the interaction and allow for the examination of patterns and sequences of behavior in addition to rates or frequencies of behavior. Twelve mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive coding categories form the core of the SHIC system (see Table 1 for descriptions of the 12 cateories).

Evaluations of the Meeting

Although GROW meetings are relatively invariant in structure, there is a great deal of diversity in the content and quality of the meetings. The Participant Rating Form (PRF) was designed to capture the group members' perspective on the general quality of the meeting and their personal reactions to the meeting. The Observer Rating Form (ORF) was filled out after the meeting by the observer who collected the SHIC data and includes qualitative and quantitative information on the topics discussed during the meeting and ratings of characteristics of both the group members and the meeting itself. With the exception of global assessments of the quality or "goodness" of the meeting, the observers and participants were necessarily asked to respond to different items. The participant was able to assess the personal impact of the meeting, while the observer responded from a more "objective," albeit distant vantage. Given these divergent perspectives and the inherent dissimilarity of the items on the two inventories, only a moderate level of association between the participant's and the observer's evaluations was expected.

In making their evaluations it was expected that both participants and observers would consider the GROW organization's espoused goals and ideals. Fundamentally, the weekly GROW meetings are opportunities for "caring and sharing." To the extent that participants and observers relied on this basic conceptualization in making their evaluations, it was predicted that high proportions of supports and personal disclosures within a meeting would be related to a positive evaluation.

Method

Data for the present study were collected from 334 meetings of 13 different ongoing GROW groups in Central Illinois. For this study, each of the 334 meetings represents one "subject." Groups were attended either weekly by two alternating participant-observers or biweekly by a single participant-observer. Meetings generally lasted from 1 1/2 to 2 hours and had 3 to 15 people in attendance.

Participant Rating Form

The PRF is a 12-item inventory which two group members filled out after each meeting. The PRF was given to participants in a systematic fashion so that all participants were asked to complete the inventories an approximately equal number of times. However, because of differences in members' attendance patterns and the size of a group, the actual number of PRF's completed by a participant ranged from 1 to 16. PRF's were completed by 232 different individuals in the 334 meetings.

Two items were differenced to create a variable that reflected the change in a participant's feeling state (relaxed vs. upset) before and after the meeting. Ten PRF items and this difference score were analyzed using a principal components procedure with varimax (orthogonal) rotation of components having eigenvalues of 1.0 or more. Two principal component analyses were done, one using the first rater at each meeting and the second using the second rater at each meeting. A two component solution was obtained in each case. Only one of the two components represented an evaluation of the meeting, the second was interpreted as a "good-GROW-member" component, and reflected the behavior of the participant rather than

characteristics of the group meeting. For the purposes of this study, only the meeting evaluation component was used. The congruency coefficient (Derogatis, Serio, & Cleary, 1972) of the meeting evaluation components in the two analyses was .96, indicating that a relatively stable solution had been generated. Items with loadings greater than .50 on the Meeting Quality component are reported in Table 2. These items were combined (with unit weighting) to create a dependent variable reflecting the participants' evaluation of the quality of their GROW meetings.

Observer Rating Form

Although the ORF is comprised of a variety of ratings of the activities and content of a GROW meeting, only the global ratings of the quality and atmosphere of the group were selected for analysis here. Two of the 13 items selected were omitted from all analyses because of insufficient variability. The remaining 11 items were analyzed using the principal components procedure with varimax rotation of factors having eigenvalues of 1.0 or more. The resulting two-component solution accounted for 57% of the total variance. In order to check the stability of the component solution, two additional analyses were done using the same procedures on "split-halves" of the total data set. Good correspondence was found between the two split-half solutions (congruency coeffient for the first factor = .99; for the second = .95). Both components may be interpreted as relevant to an evaluation of the quality of the meeting. The first component appears to be most similar to the participants' evaluation factor and was labelled Meeting Quality The second factor was labelled Positive Climate. Items and

loadings for both components are reported in Table 3. The exact factor scoring method was used to create two criterion variables.

Predictor Variables: SHIC Proportions

In the SHIC system, the observer's task is to record the continuous stream of group behavior by assigning a code to each comment that is made during the group interaction phases of the meeting (the "Middle Routine," which includes testing of knowledge of the GROW handbook and a reading and discussion, was not coded).

Eleven observers were trained in the SHIC system using videotapes of simulated GROW meetings. Reliability was assessed by comparing an observer's set of codes for a given tape with a standard or criterion set of codes. Our cooperation with the organization allowed us to video-tape several GROW meetings to use in assessing observer reliability. It was necessary to use videotapes for reliability testing rather than live inter-observer agreement because we were calculating point by point agreement and had no way of synchronizing the two observers' streams of codes at a live meeting. Observers were considered reliable when they achieved a level of agreement equal to or greater than a Kappa of .70 on a reliability test. Cohen's (1960) Kappa statistic provides a more conservative estimate of reliability than an overall percentage agreement score because it estimates controls for chance agreement. In order to check for reliability drift and decay, observers took reliability tests every three months. If they did not achieve a Kappa of .70, they were retrained until they tested with a Kappa of 70 or better. The actual range of Kappa coefficients on reliability

tests (excluding any tests taken after retraining) was .52 to .92 with a median coefficient of .72.

In order to control for length of meeting and verbosity of participants, all SHIC variables were converted to proportion variables, calculated as the frequency of each code divided by the total number of coded units at a given meeting. Preliminary analyses revealed nonnormal distributions for many of the SHIC proportion variables. In order to normalize the SHIC variable distributions, they were transformed using the T-scaling technique (see Guilford & Fruchter, 1978, pp. 478-484) prior to any subsequent analyses.

Results

Table 4 presents the zero-order correlations among the SHIC proportion variables and the three meeting evaluation variables. The observers' evaluation of Meeting Quality was not significantly correlated with the participants' evaluation of Meeting Quality ($r = .09$). The observers' evaluation of Positive Climate, however, was related to the participants' evaluation of Meeting Quality ($r = .38$, $p < .001$).

Three stepwise multiple regression analyses were performed with the participants' evaluation of Meeting Quality and the observers' evaluation of Meeting Quality and Positive Climate serving as criterion variables and the twelve SHIC behavioral variables serving as predictor variables.

In the analysis focusing on the prediction of the participants' evaluation, four behaviors were significant predictors: negative, support, direct guidance, and interpretive comments. Table 5 lists the predictor variables in order of their entry into the equation, the multiple

correlation (R), increase in R^2, and F ratio at each step, and standardized regression coefficient (β) and zero order correlation(r) for each variable. Variables with nonsignificant ($p \geq .05$) ΔR^2s are not reported in the table, but the final R after entry of all twleve variables is indicated. The four behaviors in combination acounted for 10% of the criterion variance. The presence of negative behaviors such as disagreement and disapproval during a meeting was negatively related to a positive evaluation of the meeting, accounting for 4% of the variance ($F = 10.44$, $p < .001$). Supportive comments accounted for an additional 3% of the variance ($F = 9.37$, $p < .01$). Direct guidance contributed 2% ($F = 5.56$, $p < .05$) and interpretive comments contributed 1% ($F = 3.90$, $p < .05$).

Both analyses focusing on the prediction of observer's evaluations of the meeting are summarized in Table 6. Again, only variables with significant ΔR^2s are tabled. The observer's evaluation of meeting quality was predicted by three variables: group process, agree, and personal disclosure,which together accounted for 12% of the criterion variance. The rest of the behavioral variables together accounted for an additional 2% of the variance (final $R = .38$). Group process accounted for 5% of the variance ($F = 17.05$, $p < .001$) and was the first variable to enter the equation. This was followed by agree, accounting for an additional 4% of the variance ($F = 12.65$, $p < .001$), and personal disclosure accounting for still another 2% of the variance ($F = 7.37$, $p < .01$). Observers, then, were likely to evaluate the meeting positively when the proportion of group process or structuring, directive comments was low and the proportion of agreements, acknowledgements, and personal disclosures was high.

The third and final regression analysis concerned the prediction of the observers' evaluation of the Positive Climate of the meeting. Four behavioral variables were found to be significant predictors, accounting for 19% of the criterion variance (R = .44). The lion's share of this variance was accounted for by the first variable to enter the equation, negative behaviors (R = .37, F = 46.76, $p < .001$). Personal questions, supports, and interpretive comments each contributed an additional 2% to the variance accounted for (F = 6.42, $p < .05$; F = 6.09, $p < .05$; F = 6.67, $p < .05$, respectively).

Discussion

Participants' positive evaluations of a self-help meeting were predicted by the relative absence of negative behaviors (such as disagreements, disapproval, and defensiveness) and the presence of help-giving behaviors (such as supportive and interpretive comments and direct guidance and suggestions). Observers' evaluations were divided into two components, meeting quality and positive climate. Meeting quality was predicted by the absence of the structuring, orchestrating comments coded as "group process" and the preponderance of the agree and personal disclosure codes. A positive meeting climate as evaluated by the observer was predicted by variables very similar to those important in the participant's evaluation of meeting quality. The relative absence of negative behavior was the single most important predictor. Meetings in which disagreements, disapproving statements, or defensiveness occurred in high proportions were not evaluated positively. In addition, the absence of probing, personal questions and the presence of interpretive and supportive

comments was likely to lead to a positive evaluation of the meeting's climate.

These results represent a departure from what was expected with respect to the correspondence between the participant's and the observer's evaluations. Inspection of the items comprising each of the evaluation components leads to the expectation that the participants' evaluation of the meeting quality would be most closely related to the first component of the observer's evaluation, which was consequently also labelled "Meeting Quality." The correlation between these two factors, however, was minimal. Moreover, there was no overlap in the behavioral predictors of the participants' and observers' evaluations of meeting quality. Although bearing little or no "face" resemblance to the participants' evaluation of Meeting Quality, the observers' Positive Climate variable showed a strong relationship to the participants' evaluation. Participants were likely to feel that meetings were helpful and "good" when the same behaviors were present that led observers to rate a meeting as pleasant, warm, trusting, and relaxed. The importance of negative behaviors in predicting a low evaluation of the meeting by the participants and a negative climate for the observers was striking, especially in light of the low baserate of negative codes overall.

It was group process comments, rather than negative behaviors, that adversely effected observer's evaluations of the quality of the meeting. Observers tended to feel that the quality of a meeting was compromised when there were too many structuring, directive comments. A high proportion of group process comments may be a function of a dominant,

controlling leader, or a reflection of a strong need for control and direction in the group because of an inactive, inexperienced, or low functioning constellation of group members.

It is interesting to note that the observers focused on behaviors of the "helpee" (agreements and disclosures) in their evaluation of meeting quality while the participants focused on behaviors characteristic of the "helper" (supports, interpretations, and guidances). From the participants' perspective it is the type of response that members receive when they present a problem rather than how deep, heart-felt, or disclosive their problem presentations are. It seems that the participants are keyed into the "caring" and the observers into the "sharing" part of GROW's ideal of a "caring and sharing community." Overall, the behavioral variables of the SHIC system are moderately predictive of participants' and observers' evaluations, accounting for between 13 and 20% of the variance. The global nature of many of the evaluation items may explain the modest amount of variance accounted for.

It is possible that there are behavioral events and processes that are extremely predictive of meeting evaluations which are not tapped by the twelve SHIC proportion variables. Simple proportion variables ignore the sequence and context of behaviors within a meeting. There is a growing realization among researchers of the importance of patterning and sequence in social interaction (see Cairns, 1979; Gottman, 1979; Lamb, Suomi & Stephenson, 1979). Consider, for example, two meetings in which suggestions or "guidances" are given in response to someone with a problem at the same rate, but in one meeting the problem presenter responds with a

qualification, additional information, or acceptance, or rejection of the advice immediately following each interpretation while in the second meeting, the guidances fly in shot-gun style with no chance for the problem-presenter to respond or to assimilate the barrage of information. The sequences in which behaviors follow one another clearly differentiate these two meetings. Similarly, it may be that a high proportion of supportive comments is not as important as a high rate of the particular sequence in which supportive comments follow heart-felt personal disclosures. Future research directed at these difficult questions could deepen our understanding of the appeal and effectiveness of the self-help alternative.

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TABLE 1: SHIC CODING CATEGORIES

S= Support: comments which have the aim or effect of raising or enhancing another group member's status, are nurturing, encouraging or approving of another group member, or offer tangible assistance.

I= Interpretive Comments: comments which interpret, analyze, evaluate, redefine, reconceptualize, challenge, summarize or explain another group member's comments or behavior.

G= Direct Guidance: comments which give concrete, direct and specific suggestions, direction, or guidance about possible courses of action.

R= Requests for feedback or help: comments which directly request the group or a particular member of the group to provide the speaker with an evaluation, interpretation, suggestion, information, or guidance about the speaker's feelings, actions, personal life or group behavior.

Q= Personal Questions: comments which request revealing information about an individual's feelings, motivations, opinions, or actions.

?= Impersonal Questions: comments which ask for orientation, clarification, repetition, general factual information about the world or impersonal ("safe", factual or superficial) information about another individual.

D= Personal Disclosures: comments which give specific personal information about the speaker or someone in the personal life of the speaker. "Personal" information includes any discussion of feelings, desires, expectations or behaviors which are generally non-public and not ordinarily volunteered to others.

F= General Sharing: comments which give clarification of previous comments, or general, impersonal, trivial, vague or abstract information about the world, the speaker, or other individuals.

P= Group Process: comments which have the aim or effect of altering or reflecting on the immediate group process.

A= Agreement: comments which show agreement with an opinion or interpretation previously stated, show acceptance or acknowledgement of support or feedback, or verbally indicate that the speaker will comply with a suggestion or guidance.

N= Negative: comments which explicitly disagree with a previously stated opinion or interpretation, are resistant, closed or defensive, or indicate disapproval of any part of the GROW method or philosophy, another group member or the speaker himself. This category is the negative counterpart of both the Agreement and Support categories.

T= Irrelevant Talk: comments which are not relevant to the group's current task or are nonsensical or inappropriate in the context of the GROW group.

Table 2: Participant's Evaluation of the Meeting: Items and Factor Loadings

Description of Item	Meeting Quality
Overall assessment of the "goodness" of the meeting	.67
Group's enthusiasm about members' progress	.51
Group's helpfulness for members	.63
Interest level of the discussion of the reading	.60
Group's helpfulness for participant	.70
Group's demonstration of support for participant	.68
Participant's change in feelings[a]	.68
Percentage of Total Variance	34.2

[a]Constructed by taking the difference score between two items on the PRF. N=334

Table 3: Observer's Evaluation of the Meeting: Items and Factor Loadings[a]

Description of Item	Meeting Quality	Positive Climate
Overall assessment of the Goodness of the Meeting	(.80)	.35
Goodness of the Group Interaction Phase	(.75)	.34
Goodness of the Middle Phase	(.62)	.17
Goodness of the Resumed Interaction Phase	(.72)	.25
Focus on GROW teachings	.43	-.06
Trust	.38	(.61)
Pleasantness	.11	(.79)
Tenseness	.28	(-.82)
Interest level	(.72)	.11
Intensity	(.73)	-.08
Warmth	.38	(.72)
Percentage of Total Variance	40.6	16.5

[a]Loadings greater than .50 are in parentheses. N = 334

Table 4: Intercorrelations among SHIC Proportions and the Participant's and Observer's Evaluations of the Meeting

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Talk	-	-.18***	-.04	-.03	-.01	-.17***	.08	.01	-.23***	-.19***	-.28***	.07	-.18***	.03	-.05
2. Impersonal Question		-	-.06	-.19***	.37***	-.42***	-.28***	-.22***	-.27**	-.13**	-.18***	-.11*	-.01	-.04	-.13*
3. Personal Question			-	.01	-.25***	.44***	-.19***	-.01	-.07	-.02	-.13**	.10	.07	-.17**	-.12*
4. Request for feedback				-	-.15**	.07	.22***	-.02	-.01	.08	.05	-.05	-.08	-.05	.07
5. Fact-giving					-	-.50***	-.16**	-.27***	-.40***	-.29***	-.31***	-.21***	-.12*	.05	-.06
6. Personal Disclosure						-	-.07	.07	.17	.03	.03	.07	.15**	-.06	.06
7. Group Process							-	.12*	-.25***	-.03	-.04	-.04	-.23***	.01	.00
8. Support								-	-.10*	-.14**	-.01	.02	.05	.12*	.18***
9. Interpretive Comments									-	.17***	.34***	.04	.16**	.13*	.09
10. Direct Guidance										-	.12*	.07	.14**	-.04	.09
11. Agree											-	-.28***	.21***	.11	.06
12. Disagree, Disapproval, Defensiveness												-	.01	-.37***	-.19***
13. Meeting Quality - Observer													-	.00	.09
14. Positive Climate - Observer														-	.32***
15. Meeting Quality - Participant															-

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. N = 334.

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Table 5: Summary of Stepwise Regression: Significant Behavioral Predictors of Participants Evaluation of Meeting Quality

Variable	R	Increase in R^2	F for increase	β	r
Negative Behavior	.19	.04	10.44***	-.19	-.19
Support	.26	.03	9.37**	.17	.18
Direct Guidance	.30	.02	5.56*	.13	.09
Interpretive Comments	.32	.01	3.90*	.12	.09
Final R at 12 Step	.36				

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 6: Summary of Stepwise Regression: Significant Behavioral Predictors of Observer's Evaluation of Meeting Quality and Positive Climate

Variable	R	Increase in R^2	F for increase	β	r
Criterion 1: Meeting Quality					
Group Process	.23	.05	17.05***	-.23	-.23
Agree	.30	.04	12.65***	.20	.21
Personal Disclosure	.34	.02	7.37**	.15	.16
Final R at 12th Step	.38				
Criterion 2: Positive Climate					
Negative Behavior	.37	.14	46.76***	-.37	-.37
Personal Question	.39	.02	6.42*	-.14	-.17
Support	.41	.02	6.09*	.13	.12
Interpretive Comments	.44	.02	6.67*	.14	.13
Final R at 12 Step	.45				

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001